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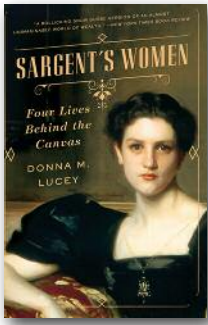


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Sargent's Women: Four Lives Behind the Canvas

Donna M. Lucey, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

Sumptuous gowns, entrancing settings and an overall ethereal quality are depicted in the portraits of the four women addressed in this book. It is the usual Sargent Style: beautiful ladies in beautiful clothes just being beautiful. This book is a compendium of four biographies that tell the real stories behind Sargent's magic canvases. Who would think that behind all the Sargentian loveliness was many a tale of deep sadness? This is sadness that comes from lives lived with a determined passion and assertiveness unusual in the nineteenth-century woman.

The first and youngest is Elsie Palmer, of the big eyes and doleful mien. She sat for her portrait at age seventeen. Looking lost, forlorn and miserable, her white dress almost resembles a shroud. Sargent's portrait not only depicts her present life but foretells her future one. Elsie was raised to be a handmaiden to a sickly mother with social and artistic aspirations. Her father had made his money in the Wild West of Colorado and Mrs. Palmer wanted out of that scene. Using her heart condition as an excuse, she took herself and Elsie to London. Here they enjoyed the company of "the cultured." Elsie continued her subservience until her mother died. She was then summoned back to Colorado to wait on her now paralyzed and demanding father. Finally, Elsie escaped by marrying Leo Myers, a younger man. They had been secretly engaged for some time. For her wedding Elsie wore a long brown robe "covered in huge buckles and bronze figures of animals." It was most peculiar. Leo eventually committed suicide and Elsie ended up back in England, taking long walks in the country...alone.

Perhaps the most curious section is that on Sally Fairchild, a redhead beauty whose Boston family was friends with Sargent's family for many years. Swathed in a heavy veil, Sally is presented in profile and really could be anybody. One gets the impression that there is more to be told here. Apparently, that was not case as she lived a rather ordinary Boston matron's life. Until, at the age of 80, she seduced a 30-year-old married man! Using Sally as a jumping off point, the author switches to Sally's sister Lucia. Although not as striking as Sally, Lucia was the interesting one. Despite parental wishes, she became an artist and married one, Henry Brown Fuller. She worked in large scale; she painted a mural for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. And she worked in small scale; she founded the American Society of Miniature Painters. Moreover, she won a bronze medal at the Paris Exposition of 1900, and medals in other world's fairs. Because her lazy tom-cat husband felt it was beneath him to work and only painted when so moved, Lucia supported him and their children. Tragically, Lucia became blind and paralyzed with multiple sclerosis, and died before she was 50. In letters and diaries, Lucia makes much of the fact that

her children were her redemption. They were extremely loving and devoted.

Elizabeth Astor Winthrop Chanler's tale culminates with her love affair with her best friend's husband, lawyer and writer Jack Chapman. But Lucey calls the chapter on Elizabeth *The Madonna* and for good reason; her early years were saintly. After her mother died when she was nine, Elizabeth was responsible for her seven younger siblings. During her teens, Elizabeth suffered a severe hip problem, and the remedy was being strapped to a board for two excruciatingly painful years. No one expected her to marry. Beautiful and suffering she soldiered on. Then along came Jack Chapman. Romance and scandal bloomed. Eventually, after much intrigue, they married.

The apogee of the book is the chapter on Isabella Stewart Gardner. Famous for flouting Boston's stern social norms, Isabella flirted outrageously with any man who crossed her path and more shockingly danced often with men who were not her husband. She even invited scantily clad prizefighters to tea! At one evening party she descended the staircase wearing two enormous diamonds attached to gold spiral wires atop her head that, knowing that the diamonds would bob and sparkle as she talked. Despite all the flirting and frivolity Isabella went on to found the very serious and still important Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston.

What about these four women inspired the author? In an interview with *Elle* magazine, Lucey says she chose these particular women "because they were not afraid to say...*I am going to be who I am....*" Indeed these four were fiercely themselves and their fascinating exploits make most entertaining reading.

Reviewed by Anne-Taylor Cahill

Anne-Taylor Cahill is a professor of philosophy at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia, and serves on the national board of the Victorian Society in America. She is also founding member and former president of the Eloise Hunter Chapter of the VSA. She often writes the Milestones column for this magazine.